United Nations S/2000/632

Security Council

Distr.: General
28 June 2000

Original: English

Report of the Secretary-General on developments in Guinea-Bissau and on the activities of the United Nations Peace-building Support Office in that country

I. Introduction

1. The present report is submitted pursuant to paragraph 14 of Security Council resolution 1233 (1999) of 6 April 1999, by which the Council requested me to keep it regularly informed and to submit a report every 90 days on developments in Guinea-Bissau and on the activities of the United Nations Peace-building Support Office in Guinea-Bissau (UNOGBIS).

2. Members of the Council will recall that in my last report of 24 March 2000 (S/2000/250), I highlighted the major challenges confronting the newly established democratic Government during the post-electoral period and the contributions of UNOGBIS in support of the national efforts to meet those challenges.

3. The present report covers developments in Guinea-Bissau since 24 March 2000 and presents an overview of the activities of UNOGBIS in support of the Government's peace-building efforts, in accordance with its revised mandate (S/2000/202).

II. Political developments

4. During the period under review, the Government of President Kumba Yala has essentially focused on consolidating the authority of the newly established democratic institutions in the face of continued interference from the military establishment, following protracted consultations with a wide spectrum of actors, who had played a prominent role during the power-sharing transitional phase. The continued high profile of the former military junta on the political scene and the lack of a constitution anchored in democratic principles constitute particularly difficult challenges for the Government. Discussions mediated by civil society leaders under the leadership of the Bishop of Bissau and facilitated by my Representative, Samuel Nana-Sinkam, have intensified with a view to redefining the role of the military in the new democratic dispensation in the country. Some progress has been made, especially with the establishment by the National Assembly of a Commission of Good Offices to bridge differences between the Government and the military establishment.

5. The appointment, on 7 April, by President Yala of a new Attorney-General and a civilian as Minister of Defence and the decision of the military establishment, following protracted consultations with a wide spectrum of actors, not to challenge the President's decree replacing the Chief of Naval Staff have been seen as further strengthening the authority of the constitutional order. Furthermore, on 7 June, during the observance, in Bissau, of the second anniversary of the outbreak of the military conflict, the military reaffirmed its intention to resume its traditional role and to subjugate itself to the civilian authorities.

6. On 15 May, the Chairman of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), President Alpha Konaré of Mali, despatched a Special Envoy to Guinea-Bissau to discuss with the authorities and other parties concerned the latest developments in the country as well as matters pertaining to peace and security in the subregion. ECOWAS member States also discussed the situation in Guinea-Bissau during their twenty-third summit meeting, held on 28 and 29

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May in Abuja. In their final communiqué, they expressed concern over continuing tensions between President Yala and the former military junta and noted that President Yala had been duly elected through free, honest and transparent elections recognized as such by the international community.

7. In a worrying development, religious and ethnic tensions erupted in some northern parts of the country between the Fula and Felupe communities and in the East between the Fula and Mandingo communities. The authorities, with the assistance of civil society, have taken immediate steps to calm the situation and reconcile the communities concerned. My Representative has also urged tolerance and called on Bissau-Guineans to work and live in harmony and avoid endangering the peace they have worked so hard to achieve.

8. As the Government continues to restore post-conflict normalcy, priority has been given to relaunching the economy with a view to improving the lives of the people. The National Assembly has approved the Government's four-year programme of work and, on 6 June, approved the 2000 budget amounting to some 86 billion CFA francs, reflecting the country's tight revenue and difficult overall economic realities. Government officials increasingly point out that the smooth functioning of state institutions is still hampered by the lack of resources.

9. In order to further strengthen the unfolding democratic process, the authorities have also stressed the need for a new post-conflict constitution. Consequently, Guinea-Bissau's Supreme Court of Justice has set up a commission to review the current constitution with a view to bringing it in line with the new democratic realities. The authorities have also announced plans to hold municipal elections in the course of the current year and have appealed for international assistance.

III. Military and security aspects

10. In the subregional context, government officials recognize that lasting security and stability depend to a large extent on peaceful cooperation with the country's neighbours. The visit to Bissau, on 29 April, of newly elected President Wade of Senegal was therefore welcomed as a significant confidence-building measure. When the security situation in Senegal's Casamance region along the border of Senegal and Guinea-Bissau deteriorated last April, the leaders of the two countries agreed to de-escalate tensions and discussed cooperative strategies of securing their common border. The unstable situation along the border is a further illustration of the security challenges facing the new Government in Guinea-Bissau.

11. My Representative, during meetings he held with President Wade and Senegalese officials in Dakar in early May, discussed ways to sustain and consolidate the initiatives on border security generated during the President's visit to Bissau in April. Mr. Nana-Sinkam will continue to explore how best to contribute to ongoing efforts to enhance security and stability with Guinea-Bissau's other neighbours in future visits to other ECOWAS leaders. I shall revert to the Council when my Representative has concluded his consultations.

12. Internally, there was a distinct rise in armed criminality and banditry attributable, in part, to the prevailing difficult economic situation, institutional and logistical weaknesses of the national police and the uncontrolled circulation of weapons in civilian hands throughout the country. In order to raise national awareness of this problem and to stimulate a discussion on ways and means of addressing it, the Human Rights League of Guinea-Bissau, in cooperation with UNOGBIS, organized a conference on criminality from 4 to 11 May in Bissau, which brought together representatives from various government ministries, the National Assembly, the judiciary and members of civil society. Meanwhile, UNOGBIS and other members of the United Nations country team, especially the World Food Programme (WFP) and the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations (FAO), continue to support the Government's efforts to launch a civilian disarmament project, for which funding is being sought from the international community.

13. Another critical security issue confronting the Government is the presence of landmines planted throughout the country during the recent armed conflict. The Government has approved a project document on demining and set up a national institution for demining activities. Under a partnership arrangement, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), national institutions and NGOs will focus on sensitization, while the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) will provide material support for national capacity-building and concrete demining operations. UNDP has already provided US $150,000 for that purpose and appealed

for additional funding from the international community. The preparatory assistance phase of the demining project is scheduled to begin in July. Once the necessary funding has been secured, the project will be extended beyond the preparatory phase.

14. In the area of demobilization and reintegration, a World Bank mission visited the country in mid-June and discussed with the Government the time-frame for the commencement of the demobilization and reintegration programme. The Government has made available facilities to house such a programme. Meanwhile, WFP and UNOGBIS are collaborating with the Government to provide daily food rations for six months to soldiers who have demobilized voluntarily.

IV. Human rights situation

15. While the human rights situation remains worrying, the Government has recommitted itself to the promotion of respect of the human rights of all Bissau-Guineans and has taken important steps in that direction. For its part UNOGBIS has continued to promote greater awareness of human rights issues, the rule of law and a wider understanding of United Nations principles in these domains. The Ministry of Justice, with the assistance of UNOGBIS, has initiated a technical programme to elaborate a national plan for human rights.

16. On 3 May, officials from the Office of the Attorney-General and UNOGBIS visited prisons to assess detention conditions. Following the visit, some Bissau-Guineans detained since the 7 May 1999 events were provisionally released. By mid-June, only 13 detainees of the original number of nearly 400 people were still detained. President Yala has repeatedly called on the judiciary to speed up trial proceedings. To assist the Government's efforts to expedite free and fair trials, UNOGBIS has facilitated the training of some 50 judges. A number of independent human rights organizations, including the OAU's African Commission on Human and People's Rights, have confirmed their interest in observing these trials.

17. In a series of recent incidents widely criticized by segments of the society, several people, including at least two journalists, were detained in May for allegedly criticizing government officials and policies. They were subsequently released, following pressure from the media and civil society. In a move not only to further energize the media sector but also to encourage a free exchange of views in the society, UNOGBIS, with funding from the Government of Germany, is facilitating the setting up of a radio and television project which will provide a forum for the free discussion of issues of national interest.

V. Humanitarian aspects

18. A well targeted humanitarian assistance strategy, good climatic conditions, a satisfactory harvest and the peaceful evolution of developments in the post-electoral period have helped significantly reduce the need for life-sustaining humanitarian assistance in Guinea-Bissau. As a result, on 7 April 2000 the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat closed its Bissau office. While the Office's training programmes designed to strengthen the Government's capacity to manage national emergencies have now been assumed by UNDP, the Office will continue to support programmes aimed at ensuring long-term stability, including demobilization, weapons collection and demining.

19. Following consultations between officials of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the Governments of Guinea and Guinea-Bissau, the repatriation from Guinea of the remaining 900 Bissau-Guinean refugees began on 15 June.

VI. Social and economic aspects

20. As normalcy continues to return to the country and the Government strives to cope with the most immediate economic and social needs of the population, endemic poverty remains the single most debilitating social and economic problem, threatening the full evolution of democracy and the consolidation of constitutional order. The level of underemployment and unemployment remain disturbingly high, and the Government experiences persistent difficulties in paying the salaries of civil servants who constitute the bulk of all formally employed Bissau-Guinean citizens.

21. Health, education, agriculture and good governance remain the Government's economic and social priorities, but the implementation of the Government's programme for the first 100 days did not

meet with much success, largely due to the complications caused by the interference of the military in the political process, the lack of resources and expertise available to the Government and poor infrastructure. Due to the scarcity of resources, especially for the procurement of fishing boats, the Government has been unable to fully exploit its natural resources.

22. As part of its ongoing dialogue with the donor community, on 11 April, the Government of Guinea-Bissau organized a meeting to review its programmes, including those presented at a UNDP round-table conference held in May 1999 in Geneva. Following the 11 April meeting, the Government decided to develop programmes in good governance and poverty eradication as well as to revise the national long-term perspective study. On 12 and 13 June, UNDP and the Government discussed the further elaboration of these programmes and the time-frame for a formal round-table conference. The Government has, meanwhile, appealed to those donors who pledged assistance to Guinea-Bissau at the 1999 Geneva round-table conference to disburse their commitments and thus permit the Government's development programmes, stressing that Guinea-Bissau, by holding free and fair elections and establishing a democratic Government, has met the conditions set by donor countries for disbursing their pledges.

VII. Observations

23. While important progress has been made on the ground since my last report, many challenges remain as Guinea-Bissau seeks to restore lasting peace, stability and sustainable development and to improve the critically low living standards of its people.

24. Consolidation of the nascent democratic institutions remains a long-term objective. Bissau-Guineans themselves must take the lead in making their hard-won achievements work to heal the wounds and to promote reconciliation in an atmosphere of respect of the constitutional order. I welcome the repeated commitment by the military establishment to withdraw from the political process and to accept the authority of the democratically elected institutions, and urge that these commitments be translated into concrete action without further delay.

25. The restructuring of the armed forces is crucial for the unfolding democratization process and remains one of the Government's post-electoral priorities. However, in the absence of adequate resources, this remains a daunting and potentially a problematic challenge. I therefore appeal once more to the international community to provide the necessary financial and material support to enable the Government address this issue effectively.

26. Further, given the serious paucity of the country's national resources and infrastructure, I call on the international community to continue to provide assistance to Guinea-Bissau to strengthen its institutional capacity and further smooth implementation of its rehabilitation, reconstruction and development priorities. Such a coordinated cooperative interaction between national and international efforts provides the basic hope for the realization of our common goal of stability and progress in Guinea-Bissau.

27. I am grateful to those Member States that have made contributions to the UNOGBIS Trust Fund. I appeal for continued and additional support. The sustained help of the international community is crucial for the consolidation of the progress achieved so far, and for helping Guinea-Bissau lay a durable foundation for a better life for its people.

28. Finally, I should like to pay tribute to my Representative, Samuel Nana-Sinkam, the staff of UNOGBIS, and the whole United Nations country team for their commendable contributions to the peace-building efforts of the Government and people of Guinea-Bissau.